STATEMENT OF RONALD E. MORGAN, DIRECTOR OF AIR TRAFFIC, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, SEPTEMBER 30, 1997

Chairman Duncan and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning. My name is Ronald E. Morgan and I am the Director of Air Traffic for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). As Director, I am responsible for the safety and efficiency of the Air Traffic Control System in the United States. I share this responsibility with the 24,000 men and women air traffic control professionals and the 500 air traffic facilities in the United States. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss FAA's national program to modernize Flight Service Stations (FSS). This program is part of the FAA's mission to enhance safety and improve the quality of our services to the aviation community and to do so in the most cost-effective manner possible. For over a decade, the FAA has been implementing a plan to upgrade and consolidate 318 Flight Service Stations in the United States into 61 larger, more modern Automated Flight Service Stations (AFSS's). These consolidated service stations provide pilots with, among other things, important aeronautical and weather information. All 61 AFSS's are now operating. As of midnight last night, with the closure of two FSS's in North Carolina, no FSS's remain open in the continental United States.

I would like to briefly review the history of the program, describe the improvements and efficiencies we have achieved, and note some of the challenges we still face. I understand that the Committee has a particular interest in the closure of the Arcata FSS in northern California, so I will also briefly touch on the events associated with the consolidation of that facility.

In the early 1980's, the FAA developed a national flight service station modernization and consolidation program. Under this program, the FAA has consolidated 304 of the original 318 Flight Service Stations located throughout the United States into 61 larger, more technologically advanced, and more productive Automated Flight Service Stations. Both the FSS's and AFSS's are staffed with FAA employees who provide a number of services including: (1) providing pre-flight and inflight briefings to both commercial and general aviation pilots regarding flight conditions; (2) providing pilots with weather, aeronautical information and operational status of facilities and airports along a pilot's flight route; and (3) providing the status of electronic aids to navigation and communications. AFSS and FSS specialists also open and close flight plans, file or modify flight plans, provide airport advisory and information services, initiate Search and Rescue actions, classify and disseminate Notices to Airmen, broadcast significant and hazardous meteorological weather advisories and relay air traffic control clearances. They do not control air traffic.

Alaska was considered separately from the continental U.S. because of unique operational conditions and the remoteness of the locations which are dependent on aviation as the only method of transportation. Alaska has three AFSS's and, using personnel from these AFSS's, operates an additional 14 FSS's under the Alaska Rotational Plan. Some of these FSS's are operating on a seasonal basis. In the continental U.S., we closed the last two FSS's--in Hickory and New Bern, North Carolina--at 12:01 this morning. With these closures, we have now completed the consolidation and modernization program we developed some 15 years ago.

With the establishment of AFSS's throughout the country, pilots are being provided with improved weather service, such as enhanced weather graphics and Next Generation Weather Radar (NEXRAD) Images, through computer links at no cost to the pilots. Preflight and inflight weather briefings to pilots are conducted over toll-free telephone lines

to the AFSS assigned responsibility for that area. If demand in one area ties up the communications to one AFSS, responses can be handled by another AFSS because personnel can access weather and operational information for the entire system. In addition, the next generation computer system for AFSS's, known as the Operational And Supportability Implementation System (OASIS) and new Integrated Communications Switching System (ICSS), will soon be available. Contained in this new system is the capability for pilots to receive weather and aeronautical information, and file flight plans via home personal computer while talking directly to a AFSS specialist.

In addition to service improvements, we estimate that the modernization program has saved $270 million over 16 years from reduced staffing and reduced building lease and maintenance costs.

Closure of the Arcata Flight Service Station

I know the Subcommittee is particularly interested in the decommissioning of the Arcata FSS, so I will address that station in detail. The Arcata FSS was located at the Eureka-Arcata Airport near McKinleyville, California, along the northern California coast, in Humboldt County, about 300 miles north of San Francisco. The airport serves commercial passenger operations, cargo flights and private aviation. Closure of the Arcata FSS--the last one scheduled for California-- was planned for some time and just over one year ago a specific date was set for the decommissioning--September 13. The FAA directly notified local officials by letter in March of this year of the planned September date for the closure. Similar to other FSS closures, we heard from various local officials and airport users who expressed their concerns about the Arcata consolidation. We responded to them directly, describing the basis for our action and how flight services would be provided by the Oakland AFSS. In July, we also participated in a congressional roundtable discussion of

the Arcata FSS closure, sponsored by you, Mr. Chairman, and Representative Riggs. We appreciated the opportunity to hear the local concerns first-hand and we have taken several steps to address those concerns.

One of the major concerns about the Arcata closure was how weather observations would be taken and provided to pilots. Arcata experiences foggy conditions frequently due to its coastal location and users of the airport had come to rely on the human observers at the Arcata FSS for real-time weather conditions.

An Automated Surface Observing System (ASOS) has been installed at Arcata, but it is not yet commissioned for operation. It will not be commissioned at Arcata until it is fully operational, and proven reliable. This technology provides one minute updates and disseminates hourly weather nationwide. When fully operational at Arcata, it will generate an official weather observation every minute, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, without the need for human intervention. However, until that time, and because of the concerns expressed by the community, the FAA in early August committed to maintain qualified human weather observers at Arcata. These contract weather observers now operate in the same manner as the weather observers did at the Arcata FSS and will continue to do so until the ASOS issues have been resolved.

In addition, in response to some concerns raised at the July congressional roundtable, we made several improvements to the facilities at the Arcata airport, including installation of pilot-controlled lighting for the runway, and better communications via newly installed remote communication air/ground frequencies enabling pilots to obtain air traffic clearances directly from the Seattle Air Route Traffic Control Center (ARTCC). Also, real-time Runway Visual Range (RVR) information on ground level visibility will be provided directly to the Seattle ARTCC controllers through newly established telephone circuits.

Finally, the FAA recently commissioned the Rainbow Ridge Air Route Surveillance Radar (ARSR-4), located 45 miles south of Arcata, which allows controllers to monitor aircraft on instrument approach to Arcata nearly to the ground.

The FAA closed the Arcata FSS on September 24 and transferred the six remaining FAA personnel to other assignments. FAA personnel at the Oakland AFSS now provide virtually the same services to users of the Arcata airport as were previously provided by the Arcata FSS, although not "over the counter, face to face." Instead, for example, FAA personnel and equipment now provide preflight and inflight weather briefings to pilots over toll-free telephone lines.

We believe that time and experience will show the aviation community of Arcata that the services provided to them by the Oakland AFSS are equal or better than the services previously provided by the Arcata FSS. Why do we believe this? Because we have over ten years of experience with our modernization program in all parts of the country, in various climates and operational conditions. I want to emphasize that we have found no detrimental effects to safety due to the consolidation program and we expect the same result at Arcata.

The FAA has implemented the consolidation program over time through careful study and planning, as well as after consultations with affected local communities, with the users of the facilities, and with Congress. With Congress' support, our goal was to modernize and consolidate these facilities and still provide equal or better service to the aviation community. Over the past decade, I believe we have achieved this. I can assure you that the modernization program has resulted in no decline in services or safety and, in fact, has resulted in improvements in many areas.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the FAA's number one mission is protecting and enhancing public safety. We study, evaluate, and make our decisions for all our programs in that context. As a result, this country has a strong record of achievement in aviation safety. Much of the credit for that belongs to the dedicated men and women who make up the aviation industry -- the professionals in both the public and private sector. Safety is everyone's concern and everyone's responsibility.

Our challenge now is to make our skies even safer in the face of dynamic industry growth and to modernize the nation's airspace system in a timely, cost-effective way. The program to modernize our flight service stations is a key component of that effort. We have improved services while attaining greater cost-efficiencies. With the system of Automated Flight Service Stations across the country, pilots will be able to access more timely, accurate and up-to-date information for their flight operations. However, we know it's not perfect; and we will continue to evaluate and improve our technology, particularly with regard to ASOS. Most importantly, we will retain human weather observers in places like Arcata until we are sure that the system is performing the way we want it to.

That concludes my remarks, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions.